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CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS, INCLUDING THE QUESTIONS OF: FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Written statement* submitted by the Reporters sans frontières international, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[18 January 2002]

*This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Burma: 18 journalists behind bars

Burma keeps the infamous privilege of being the biggest prison worldwide for journalists. The dialogue between the military junta and the democratic opposition did not favour any significant improvement of the situation of press freedom in 2001. Censorship is stricter as ever. Despite the liberation of the journalists **Soe Thein**, in June, and **San San Nweh**, on July 18, the military junta has not emptied its jails. Even worse, some journalists, **Sein Hla Oo** in particular, have served their time and have not been freed yet. Nevertheless, since October 2000, the military junta and the national League for democracy (LND, party headed by Peace Nobel prize Aung San Suu Kyi) meet regularly and more than two thousand opponents, among whom LND members, have been released. "We have passed from the most gloomy pessimism to a careful optimism", sums up a diplomat posted in Rangoon.

Several journalists are held in conditions endangering their lives. Bad treatments are still in force in some prisons and detention centres and some journalists are suffering from serious mental diseases due to long periods of isolation. Arrested and condemned to heavy sentences for having "circulated news items hostile to the State", for owning a non-declared video-camera, for answering to the questions of a foreign journalist or for having sent information to exiled Burmese media, most of the journalists imprisoned throughout the country are also members of the LND.

Radio, television and all dailies are under the control of the military junta. Generals and other dignitaries are relentlessly front page news. The first channel, *TV Myanmar*, depends on the ministry of Information, the second one, *TV Myawady*, on the army. All dailies are state-controlled. Some sixty private magazines (weekly and monthly) called "gya-neh" are standing alongside these official media and undergo the strictest control of the censorship bureau. Some generals or their relatives own some of these publications in which we can read a jumble of "people" news, articles on international, national and economical news, reports on cultural and sport events, news items and cartoons. The private weekly *Myanmar Times* alone can afford to publish, in English, articles that censorship would not accept for publications in Burmese. Its price remains highly prohibitive to Burmese people. Censorship, threats, arrests are still the fate of journalists working for the few private media or of political militants who attest of the situation in the country. Despite these facts, lieutenant general Khin Nyunt asserts in March that press freedom is "observed at a satisfactory level". The number three of the junta asks governmental newspapers to improve their quality in order to attract new readers. And he renews his warnings to those who "would attempt to publish news items likely to affect the population".

The foreign press is not treated any better. "As soon as there is an event in Burma, we are systematically refused a press visa. We normally get a one-week visa at best" testifies a journalist for a western press agency based in Bangkok. For now ten years, foreign journalists have been trying to bypass the drastic controls imposed by the army in power in Rangoon. Ten or so are on a list of people barred from staying in the country. Some were even expulsed by force before appearing on that list, which gathers among others reporters for the radio *Voice of America*, the weekly *Far Eastern Economic Review*, French dailies *Le Monde* and *Libération*, the newspaper *New York Times*, *BBC* radio or television channel *France 2*. The scarce reporters who still try to cover Burma, do it with a tourist visa while avoiding to draw the attention of omnipresent MiS (secret service). Foreign journalists are regularly accused of being "enemies to the country" and "neo-colonialists". However, in April, in the official daily *The New Light of Myanmar*, western journalists were labelled as "fifth column of the old neo-colonialism". On the other hand, on January 13, for the first time in many years, State newspapers did not publish scathing attacks on Peace Nobel Prize, Aung San Suu Kyi. A few days later, junta generals are said to have ordered that articles insulting the opposition leader be ended following a request from ONU emissary Razali Ismail.

The only news items in Burmese that are not yet subjected to censorship are those broadcast by international radios. *BBC*, *Voice of America (VOA)*, *Radio Free Asia (RFA)* and *Democratic Voice of Burma* are very widely listened to in the country.

But in 2001, still under sanction order by the European union and the United States the Burmese junta seems to have grown aware of how important it is to look like "a more open regime" in front of the world. This year, advised by their Asian friends, Malaysia in particular, the Burmese army authorised a new radio station to be launched on FM bands with "light and entertaining programs". In July, the authorities also announced that a television channel by satellite was launched in English supposedly to show the "true image of lifestyle in the country". At last, In September, the military junta announces that once again licences for satellite antenna would be granted. It was not possible since 1993, except for hotels designed for tourists and for some public services.

Eighteen journalists imprisoned

On 1st January 2002, at least eighteen journalists are imprisoned in Burma: Aung Pwint, Kyi Tin Oo, Ko Sein Ohn, Khin Aye Kyu, Myint Thein, Yan Aung Soe, Thaung Tun, Win Tin, Sein Hlaing, Myo Myint Nyein, Ohn Kyaing, Sein Hla Oo, Khin Maung Win (Sunny), Tha Ban, Aung Zin Min, Thein Tan, Cho Seint and Aung Myint.

Win Tin was arrested on 4th July 1989 and held in custody at the prison of Insein. Successively sentenced to three (October 1989), ten (June 1992) and seven years (March 1996) imprisonment, he is serving a sentence of twenty-years imprisonment on the whole. The minutes of his third condemnation stipulates that Win Tin has "secretly published anti-governmental propaganda " in prison. He is presently held in the special block, cell 10, of the prison of Insein. But his utterly weak health compels the authorities to transfer him regularly to the prison hospital. During these twelve years of detention, among other things the journalist suffered from two heart attacks, a slipped disk and underwent two surgeries. Due to bad conditions of detention he also lost most of his teeth and for several months, the authorities refused to provide him with dentures. Former chief editor of the newspaper *Hanthawathi*, author of many articles against the regime and Aung San Suu Kyi's close advisor, seventy-one-year Win Tin refused several times to sign a letter of resignation for the LND in exchange for his freedom. He is admired by political prisoners and called Saya (wise) by Aung San Suu Kyi and LND militants. According to a former political prisoner, he never stopped withstanding pacifically powers' orders and has many political conversations with cellmates. He is the one who completed the document secretly addressed to the special rapporteur of the United Nations. on detention conditions at Insein. In 1995, while he was held in one of the kennels of the prison, Win Tin pronounced a speech to celebrate Burma national day.